



Hezbollah, a Lebanese Shi'ite political party and paramilitary group formed by Muslim clerics (shown here during training), has been funded by the Iranians to fight the Israeli invasion of Lebanon for decades. As part of the escalating Iran-Israel proxy war, the Iranian Revolutionary Guard has supplied weapons, including drones and missiles, to groups such as Hezbollah, the Houthis in Yemen, and Shi'ite militias in Iraq. (Screenshot from Israel Defense Forces)

The Escalating Stakes of Proxy Wars



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Although the United States is competing and preparing for conflict against near-peer adversaries, proxy wars will be the most likely venue for great powers to advance their interests without incurring the costs of direct conflict against each other.¹ However, future proxy wars will also look vastly different from their Cold War antecedents, resembling the destructive conventional wars that

great powers previously sought to avoid.² The Russo-Ukrainian war is emblematic of this new dynamic, with sponsors overtly supporting their favored belligerent and the escalating use of high-end weaponry.³ In other conflicts as well, sponsors are forgoing deniability in favor of achieving objectives by fighting side-by-side with proxies or deploying conventional forces like Saudi Arabia in Yemen.⁴

This trend toward escalation is driven by strategic factors that favor direct conflict on the part of sponsors.⁵ Identifying these factors is crucial for U.S. Army leaders because the Army is responsible for shaping operational environments to the United States' advantage, preventing conflict through credible deterrence, prevailing in large-scale ground combat when deterrence fails, and consolidating gains to make operational successes enduring.⁶ As the global order continues to fragment, proxy wars will abound. The Army will be charged with deterring revisionist states from escalating proxy wars into conventional interstate conflicts that would be even more destabilizing and costly to U.S. interests. This will require adaptations in information sharing and employment of forward-stationed forces, such as Army special operations forces (ARSOF) and security force assistance brigades (SFABs), and theater armies that manage force tailoring and command the Army component during the initial stages of crises that include escalation from low-level proxy wars into direct conflict.⁷

Defining Proxy War

Proxy warfare literature is mostly based on Cold War and Global War on Terrorism archetypes.

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In the case of the former, Karl W. Deutsch and Yaacov Bar-Siman-Tov focused on cases where two external powers supported opposing sides in a third country to advance their interests, with the intrastate conflict effectively substituting for direct conflict between the sponsors.⁸ During the early years of the Global War on Terrorism, Tyrone Groh described proxy wars as external powers directing local forces to achieve a political objective within another country.⁹ Broader

definitions were proposed in the 2010s that stressed sponsors' indirect involvement and delegation of security to local actors based on shared strategic interests instead of ideological affiliations.¹⁰ As the continuing evolution of its definition suggests, the label "proxy war" has been applied to wide range of conflicts. Since the Cold War, it has typically been ascribed to civil wars that experience foreign interference.¹¹ In the post-Cold War era, the label has been applied to any conflict that features some form of support relationships between actors, conditioned on cooperation and with potential for escalation.¹² Proxy relationships were based on ideological affiliations during the Cold War, but sponsors now back proxies of all political stripes.¹³

In terms of operational control, some sponsors exert "hands-on control" while others take a "hands-off approach" via inducements.¹⁴ Related to this dynamic, some proxies are completely dependent on sponsor aid, while others possess the means for independent action.¹⁵ Sponsor aid can range from creating insurgent movements, financial support, technology transfers, and even deploying one's own troops.¹⁶ Establishing concrete criteria to classify conflicts as proxy wars remains difficult because governments prefer to describe their activities in other terms, such as "security force assistance or working by, with, and through" in the U.S. case.¹⁷

Proxy War's Strategic Utility

Several constraints dissuade states from directly engaging other states in armed conflict. For nuclear powers, the destructiveness of nuclear weapons makes their tactical and operational employment counterproductive, restricting nuclear weapons' utility to deterring other nuclear powers.¹⁸ The desire to avoid nuclear war is what made proxy wars the ideal vehicles for the United States and the Soviet Union to advance their interests during the Cold War.¹⁹ Another example of this logic is how China was willing to directly intervene in the Korean War before it possessed nuclear weapons, but then restricted its involvement in the Vietnam War to indirect support once it also became a nuclear power and nuclear warfare against the United States became a real possibility.²⁰ Nonnuclear conventional war also has its drawbacks. High-end weapons are costly and time-consuming to produce, and their attrition rate is high during conventional battles.²¹ Publics have become more casualty averse, especially when the conflict in

question is not considered a vital interest.²² The increased economic interdependence of states also reduces conventional wars' utility.²³ Modern communication platforms increase public awareness of these costs and skews governments' cost-benefit analysis away from direct conflict, leading some thinkers to claim that "conventional war is dead."²⁴

Proxy wars provide a way to externalize these costs. This proposition is especially attractive for limited objectives such as economic interests, maintaining a regional status quo, and law enforcement issues such as narcotics, migration, and arms trafficking.²⁵ The increasingly multipolar nature of the world ensures there's no shortage of actors who can inflict violence.²⁶ Some actors can be co-opted based on shared security objectives, in line with Kautilya's concept, "The enemy of my enemy is my friend."²⁷ Others, especially nonstate actors, can be induced based on ideology or financial motivations, and nonstate actors have the added flexibility of not conforming to the laws of armed conflict.²⁸ Proxies can be employed to impose costs on targeted adversaries, denying them access to territory and resources or discrediting them, while the sponsors gain access to proxies' newly won resources and territory.²⁹ Additionally, sponsors can influence the trajectory of proxy conflicts by increasing or decreasing their support as suits their strategic interests.³⁰

Nonetheless, proxy wars contain drawbacks that impact sponsors' probability of success. Increasing support to proxies can provoke "in kind" escalations from competitors that wipe out sponsors' strategic gains or engender "blowback" directly against a sponsor.³¹ Diverging sponsor and proxy interests is also a concern, especially since a conflict's outcome is usually a vital interest for the proxy and not so for sponsor, which can lead proxies to make decisions that go against sponsors' interests.³² Proxies can also manipulate sponsors into providing more support or getting more involved in a conflict, while proxies' corruption can result in military aid being diverted to unintended actors or purposes.³³ Lastly, proxy wars tend to exacerbate instability, which could create unanticipated threats for erstwhile sponsors.³⁴

Drawbacks notwithstanding, as great power competition intensifies, proxy wars will proliferate.³⁵ But the fragmented global order has lessened great powers' influence over other actors that also seek to upend the status quo in their favor.³⁶ This "polyarchic" system is

more decentralized than multipolar systems and is characterized by transient relationships between state and nonstate actors.³⁷ Even the strongest states will require proxies to exert influence in polyarchic systems.³⁸ The diffusion of power will allow smaller states and even nonstate actors to advance their interests via proxy wars.³⁹ Furthermore, if it suits their interests, states will face less constraints to enter into direct conflict. Rather than being dead, conventional-style, direct conflict will experience a resurgence.

Case Studies

All proxy wars have the potential to escalate, but this article hypothesizes certain dynamics will decrease or increase the likelihood of direct conflict by sponsors. First, direct conflict will be more likely if a sponsor perceives a vital interest to be at stake.⁴⁰ In these cases, since the outcome is much more salient to sponsors, proxy campaigns will be characterized by hands on control and maximalist objectives.⁴¹ However, in conflicts where there are two opposing nuclear-armed sponsors, direct conflict is avoided because fear of nuclear retaliation will still override any perceived vital interests in the proxy conflict. For the purposes of this analysis, direct conflict is defined as instances when a state employs its own forces against another state without attempting to obfuscate its involvement. This framework will be used to analyze the Syrian Civil War, the pre- and post-2022 phases of the Russo-Ukrainian War, the Iran-Israel conflict, and the M23 (March 23 Movement) insurgency in the eastern Congo.

Syrian civil war (Russia vs. United States). U.S. objectives in Syria were limited, initially focused on pressuring President Bashar al-Assad to enter negotiations with the opposition but later prioritizing defeating the Islamic State.⁴² In line with its nonvital interest in the conflict, U.S. involvement consisted of air support and advisors.⁴³ Russia's interests can also be considered nonvital, since it only aimed to preserve the Assad regime in order to undermine U.S. regional influence and extract economic concessions.⁴⁴ Accordingly, Russia ramped up its support from arms sales to deploying two thousand personnel and launching air strikes, while Wagner Group secured Russia's oil and gas concessions.⁴⁵

It was Wagner who came into contact with U.S. Special Forces at Dier ez-Zor in February 2018,



suffering over two hundred casualties.⁴⁶ The Russian Foreign Ministry denied any government involvement and referred to the combatants as “volunteers.”⁴⁷ However, this denial was undermined by the use of Russian military flights and hospitals to evacuate and treat the casualties, while Wagner’s then-director, Yevgeny Prigozhin, was already a known associate of Vladimir Putin.⁴⁸ Nonetheless, the denial was accepted by the United States to avoid a direct conflict between two nuclear powers in a region where neither had vital interests at stake.⁴⁹

Russo-Ukrainian war, 2014 (Russia vs. Ukraine).

Due to Russia’s historic ties with Ukraine, the Kremlin considers its continued influence over Ukraine a vital interest, an interest that was threatened by Ukraine’s drift toward the European Union.⁵⁰ Russia employed a mixed strategy in 2014, exerting hands-on control over the seizure of Crimea, relying on Spetsnaz and airborne units to seize key military and political sites on the peninsula, and delegating political activities to local proxies to legitimate the annexation.⁵¹ In the Donbas region, Russia initially delegated military operations to the Donetsk and Luhansk People’s Armies, although these proxy forces were admittedly established and advised by Russian officers.⁵² When Ukrainian forces began inflicting defeats on Russia’s proxies, the Kremlin deployed conventional units to wage direct conflict and consolidated its gains with the signing of the Minsk agreements.⁵³ The Kremlin tightened its control over its Donbas proxies by assassinating leaders it deemed fractious or independent minded.⁵⁴

Although Ukraine also employed proxies in the form of progovernment and nationalist militias, it is more accurate to classify it as a target state rather than a sponsor.⁵⁵ Ukraine was initially unable to exert the same level of control over its militias as Russia did over its Crimean and Donbas proxies due to its army’s

U.S. Air Force video footage shows precise hits on Syrian pro-regime forces and members of Russia’s private military company Wagner near Deir ez-Zor in Syria between late 7 February and early 8 February 2018. The strikes first destroyed a T-72 main battle tank (left) and then hit an artillery gun and soldiers. (Screenshots from videos by Sr. Airman Patrick Wyatt, U.S. Air Forces Central)

weakness.⁵⁶ While most Ukrainian militias were eventually integrated into the security forces, some remain outside the state security apparatus thanks to political connections and popular support.⁵⁷ Ukraine’s interest in the conflict can also be considered vital because its territorial integrity was at stake, and since it agreed to denuclearize after the Soviet Union’s dissolution, it is classified as nonnuclear power.⁵⁸ The lack of nuclear deterrence paired with Russia’s perceived vital interest made escalation into direct conflict a pragmatic choice, especially when Russia’s Donbas proxies proved unable to achieve their assigned objectives.

Russo-Ukrainian war, 2022 (Russia vs. United States). The previously discussed dynamics of the 2014 conflict, especially the limited utility of its proxy forces, led Russia to launch a conventional invasion of Ukraine in 2022. When Ukraine defeated the initial Russian advance, the United States and its allies increased their provision of arms, training, and financial support to Ukraine.⁵⁹ While the Kremlin continues to view the subjugation of Ukraine as a vital interest, the United States has the limited objective of weakening Russia to dissuade the Kremlin from invading other eastern European states.⁶⁰

Russia has maintained a hands-on strategy regarding proxies with Donbas forces and Wagner mercenaries operating in support of conventional units.⁶¹ The U.S. strategy is better described as mixed since U.S. military and intelligence personnel have influenced Ukrainian forces’ tactical targeting and operational



planning, but Ukrainian military leaders have asserted their operational autonomy as the war progresses.⁶² Despite Russia's vital interest in the conflict and its nuclear saber-rattling, it has refrained from attacking the United States and its NATO allies, while U.S. leaders have ruled out "direct intervention," even though military advisors have reentered Ukraine.⁶³ Both U.S. and Russian allies have demonstrated similar restraint. Lithuania, a NATO member, has declined Ukrainian requests to deploy its forces into Ukraine, while China, Russia's most important supporter, has stopped short of providing weapons.⁶⁴

Iran-Israel proxy war. Iran's proxy war against Israel started in the 1980s. It has become much more salient to Israel because Hamas's 7 October 2023 attack has shaken the Israeli public's sense of safety and because Iran is close to achieving a "nuclear breakout."⁶⁵ For Tehran, preserving its proxy network is a vital interest since its proxies serve as a shielding mechanism to avoid a repeat of the devastation the Iranian homeland endured during the Iran-Iraq War.⁶⁶ Israel's assassinations of senior Iranian officials and proxy leaders undermined Tehran's credibility amongst its network, and prompted the Iranian regime's decision to launch two barrages

A Russia-backed rebel looks through a firing port at his sector of fire near Donetsk, Eastern Ukraine, on 26 May 2015. Though Russia denies involvement, the People's Militia of Donetsk People's Republic and the People's Militia of Luhansk People's Republic allegedly receive weapons, supplies, and training as a proxy of the Russian Armed Forces. (Photo by Mstyslav Chernov)

against Israel in April and October 2024 from Iranian territory.⁶⁷ Besides the assassinations, Israel has also targeted antiaircraft systems near Iranian nuclear sites.⁶⁸

These strikes left Iran's defense network in tatters and presented Israel with a window of opportunity to achieve its vital interest of disrupting Iran's uranium enrichment.⁶⁹ Israel exploited this opportunity by launching strikes on June 2025, undermining two months of negotiations between the United States and Iran.⁷⁰ With negotiations derailed, the Trump administration opted to enter the conflict, striking Iran's nuclear facilities with bunker-busting munitions, a capability Israel lacks and was considered necessary to deal the level of damage Israeli leaders sought to inflict on Tehran's nuclear program.⁷¹ After a retaliatory strike on U.S. forces in Qatar, a ceasefire was announced on 23 June 2025.⁷²



Rather than serve as a coda, the United States' intervention has prompted a reversion to proxy war tactics. Iran resumed its assistance to the Houthis and Hezbollah in July 2025, aiming to rebuild their capacity for offensive action against Israel.⁷³ Israel has continued to target these proxies' leaders, successfully killing the Houthi prime minister in August but failing to kill Hamas's senior leadership during its 9 September strike on their residence in Doha, Qatar.⁷⁴ Israel's latest strike on Qatari territory suggests its interests are increasingly diverging from its main patron, the United States, since Qatar is a U.S. ally and other U.S.-friendly states in the region have condemned the attack and called for a diplomatic resolution to the conflict.⁷⁵

M23 insurgency (Democratic Republic of the Congo vs. Rwanda). Rwanda's government exploits the memory of the 1994 Rwandan genocide to justify sponsoring insurgencies in the eastern provinces of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). Their purported aims are to protect ethnic Tutsis by eradicating the Hutu militias (*Forces démocratiques de libération du Rwanda*, or FDLR) who committed the genocide.⁷⁶ However, the FDLR has not staged a major attack on Rwanda since 2001, and Rwanda,

Members of the March 23 Movement (M23) occupy the town of Bunagana in eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo on 7 July 2012. Originally formed in 2012, M23 is a Congolese Rwandan-backed paramilitary group formed by ethnic Tutsis who said they took up arms to protect the rights of the minority group. (Photo courtesy of Al Jazeera English, CC BY-SA 2.0)

more likely, seeks control over mineral deposits and to expand its territory.⁷⁷

Because Rwanda's proxies are completely reliant on Kigali for material support, the Rwandan army exerts hands-on control over their operations.⁷⁸ Ironically, the Rwanda's overbearing influence has cost its proxies legitimacy among Congolese communities, including the Tutsis Rwanda claims it is protecting.⁷⁹ Despite lacking popular support, Rwanda's current proxy force, the *Mouvement du 23 mars* (March 23 Movement, or M23), has seized the provincial capitals of Goma and Bukavu in January and February 2025, respectively.⁸⁰ M23's success has been attributed to its possession of surface-to-air missiles, armored vehicles, drones, electronic warfare capabilities, and the support of four thousand Rwandan troops, although Kigali denies these allegations.⁸¹ DRC also employs proxy militias called *wazalendo* and even

Table. Case Study Analysis

Conflict	Sponsors/Targets*	Vital Interest	Control over Proxies	Nuclear Armed	Direct Conflict?
Syrian Civil War	Russia	N	Hands-Off	Y	N
	U.S.	N	Hands-Off	Y	
Ukraine 2014	Russia	Y	Mixed	Y	Y
	Ukraine*	Y	Hands-Off	N	
Ukraine 2022	Russia*	Y	Hands-On	Y	N
	U.S.	N	Mixed	Y	
Iran-Israel	Iran	Y	Hands-On	N	Y
	Israel*	Y	N/A	Y	
M23 Insurgency	Dem. Rep. of the Congo*	Y	Hands-Off	N	N
	Rwanda	N	Hands-On	N	

* Denotes "targets" within a proxy war

(Table by author)

FDLR remnants.⁸² However, while Rwanda’s proxies are a product of its power projection, the *wazalendo* are a product of the Congolese government’s feebleness since they act independently of the Congolese army and gain prestige at the army’s expense.⁸³

On 19 March, the presidents of DRC and Rwanda agreed to a ceasefire, but fighting continued due to M23’s refusal to withdraw from captured territory.⁸⁴ U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio hosted a ceremony a month later where both states’ foreign ministers committed to submitting draft peace proposals by 2 May; however, this deadline passed while the M23 continued to seize territory in eastern Congo.⁸⁵ Finally in 28 June a peace agreement was signed in Washington, D.C., by the Congolese and Rwandan foreign ministers.⁸⁶

However, implementing the agreement has proved challenging. Rwanda has delayed withdrawing its troops from Congolese territory, demanding the complete eradication of FDLR forces as a precondition.⁸⁷ Further complicating matters is M23 leaders’ insistence on only honoring agreements reached through their separate negotiations with the Congolese government.⁸⁸ Although a Declaration of Principles was signed on 19 July, clashes between Congolese and M23 forces have been recorded as recently as August, and

the M23 delegation has missed the agreed upon August 18 deadline for a final peace deal.⁸⁹ Assuming Rwanda still exerts hands-on control over M23, the divergence between sponsor’s word and proxy’s deed suggest that Kigali perceives the continuation of hostilities as beneficial to Rwandan interests.

Analysis

The table consolidates the case study findings to identify what factors affected the sponsors’ decision to escalate into direct conflict. Cases are classified as a “yes” for direct conflict if the sponsors openly involved their forces in a proxy war. Otherwise, they are classified as “no” without distinguishing between cases where sponsors truly did not employ their forces or simply refuse to acknowledge their involvement.

In line with the first hypothesis, vital interest appears to be a determining factor in pushing sponsors to wage direct conflict, with the added note that in both “yes” cases the targeted state also had a vital interest at stake. This correlation could be construed as the targeted state fighting back so ferociously that sponsors are compelled to escalate their involvement. There appears to be no relationship between sponsors’ level of control and the decision to escalate into direct

conflict, so the second hypothesis is disproved. The nuclear avoidance hypothesis is substantiated since two of the three “no” cases involved opposing nuclear powers, although it was the same states in both cases. The third case, M23 insurgency, involved two nonnuclear states, but the lack of direct conflict can be attributed to Rwanda lacking a vital interest, notwithstanding its claims of genocide prevention.

Deter and Prevail

The increased likelihood for proxy wars to escalate into direct conflict poses a challenge for the U.S. Army, which is expected to deter escalation and prevail in armed conflict while also undergoing restructuring in anticipation of future operational requirements.⁹⁰ Changing sponsors’ perception of vital interest in a conflict is a political and diplomatic matter, and outside the scope of responsibility of the U.S. Army. However, Army leaders can adapt how they employ forces to deter sponsors from escalating into direct conflict or impose costs if escalation does occur. These adaptations can buy time and space for policymakers to deescalate crises via diplomatic means or set conditions for larger U.S. military interventions if needed.

Army leaders should start by improving information-sharing between theater armies and ARSOF elements in theater. Like SFABs, ARSOF elements provide combatant commanders with situational awareness and support security cooperation efforts.⁹¹ Additionally, ARSOF’s focus on irregular warfare and foreign internal defense makes them the most likely U.S. forces to be involved in proxy wars since these conflicts usually have an insurgency component, and sponsors usually employ nonmilitary capabilities to subvert targeted states’ capacity to resist proxy aggression.⁹² Therefore, ARSOF elements are best-situated to sense and report escalation indicators such as the presence of sponsor forces or the introduction of high-end capabilities that proxies previously lacked. These indicators can inform theater armies’ force-tailoring processes in the event U.S. policymakers decide to deploy additional U.S. forces to deter escalation or defend against aggression if deterrence fails.⁹³

Presently, however, ARSOF elements lack a direct information-sharing channel to theater armies because they are employed through the theater special operations commands during competition.⁹⁴ Today’s fluid

security environment is characterized by simultaneously blurry and thin lines among competition, crisis, and conflict, which confers advantage upon revisionist powers that seek to upend the status quo. The information gap between ARSOF elements and theater armies provides revisionist powers further advantage by delaying U.S. responses while leaders make sense of a proxy conflict’s unexpected escalation into interstate conventional warfare.

A way to mitigate the information gap is by leveraging an existing capability, special operations command and control elements (SOCCE) to integrate relevant intelligence from the theater special operations commands’ forward-stationed forces into theater armies’ operations and plans. During steady-state operations, SOCCEs are employed to facilitate theater armies’ daily Title 10 responsibilities to ARSOF units in theater.⁹⁵ When needed, SOCCEs also conduct other synchronization and liaison activities to include sharing intelligence from ARSOF units to answer supported conventional forces commanders’ information requirements.⁹⁶ Doctrine is unclear on whether SOCCEs are permanent or temporary organizations, but SOCCEs must become permanent cells within all theater army staffs going forward to ensure the seamless and continuous integration of ARSOF intelligence into theater army operations in response to, or better yet in anticipation of, conflict escalation.⁹⁷

Theater armies should also consider adjusting time-phased force and deployment data (TPFDD) to rapidly deploy small units with high-end capabilities (e.g., air and missile defense, electronic warfare, long-range precision fires, space) to attach to forward-stationed forces (SFABs and ARSOF) at the outset of large-scale combat operations. These modest reinforcements would bolster forward-stationed forces’ capacity to assist partner forces in securing the strategic lines of communication and key terrain required for joint forcible entry operations.⁹⁸ More importantly, they would offset any technological advantages the adversary possesses vis-à-vis partner forces, enabling forward-stationed and partner forces to fight on more favorable terms while larger U.S. units deploy into joint operations areas.

These technological offsets are crucial when considering the time required to deploy sizeable U.S. forces, time in which adversaries will retain the numerical advantage. While the 82nd Airborne Division is supposed

to deploy one infantry brigade within ninety-six hours, other formations take much longer to deploy: active-duty Stryker and armored brigades require fourteen days, a National Guard brigade requires fifty days, and a National Guard division requires eighty days.⁹⁹ These timelines will be longer if U.S. forces are deployed to regions that lack pre-positioned stocks and robust logistics support, regions where SFABs and ARSOF are expected to operate.

Besides adjusting theater armies' TPFDDs, SFAB and ARSOF units will need to be evaluated on their ability to command and control these attached units in conjunction with partner forces. A possible solution could be to expand combat training center rotations to include a "Defense by Forward-Stationed Forces" phase in which SFAB and ARSOF units act as task forces employing high-end capabilities to assist partner forces' defensive and retrograde operations in response to an invasion.¹⁰⁰ Combat training center rotations would also be ideal venues to collect lessons learned about the optimal force sizes and compositions that SFAB and ARSOF units of varying echelons could effectively command and control, which would inform theater armies' TPFDDs.

China's Proxy War Potential

As the United States' "sole pacing threat," the People's Republic of China's (PRC) likelihood to sponsor proxies and engage in direct conflict with other states merits special attention.¹⁰¹ The PRC sponsored communist proxies in the Korean and Vietnam Wars during the Cold War, yet only engaged in direct combat during the former before it became a nuclear power.¹⁰² In the present day, while U.S. military leaders and civilian policymakers focus on the PRC's modernization of its conventional military capabilities, they must also account for the PRC's continued use of proxies.¹⁰³

PRC proxies fall into one of two categories, irregular or state. Its irregular proxies consist of frontier and maritime militias that enforce Chinese territorial claims; yet, they do not provide the same plausible deniability as foreign proxies because their members are Chinese nationals.¹⁰⁴ Nationality notwithstanding, by posing as fishing vessels, the PRC's maritime militia has managed to encroach on other states' territorial waters without provoking an escalation into direct conflict.¹⁰⁵ A potential area for Beijing to employ irregular proxies outside its near abroad is Africa, where Chinese SOF and private

military companies could prop up or destabilize governments to deny U.S. firms access to the continent's resources.¹⁰⁶ Currently, only twenty Chinese private military companies, with three thousand contractors total, operate internationally. However, these meager numbers could be supplemented by the four million contractors employed in the Chinese domestic security industry.¹⁰⁷

The PRC also provides aid to states whose actions frustrate the interests of its perceived adversaries. Its economic and diplomatic support for Russia's invasion of Ukraine is motivated by its desire to weaken the United States, although it has stopped short of providing weapons.¹⁰⁸ To counter deepening U.S.-India security cooperation, the PRC has increased its arms trade and economic investment in Pakistan, India's neighbor and rival.¹⁰⁹ In the aftermath of May 2025's India-Pakistan border conflict, the PRC moved up its delivery of J-35A fifth-generation stealth jets to Pakistan from January 2026 to August 2025, in a bid to ensure Pakistani air superiority over India.¹¹⁰ These developments could portend the beginning of a proxy arms race in a region where three nuclear powers—China, India, and Pakistan—have conflicting territorial claims and a tendency toward direct conflict.

Besides its proxy sponsorships, the PRC has also engaged in direct conflict with India without escalating to nuclear warfare. In 2020, melee clashes between Chinese and Indian troops resulted in forty Chinese and twenty Indian soldiers being killed, their first serious engagement since the 1962 Indo-China War, which occurred before either state was a nuclear power.¹¹¹ There were additional clashes in 2021 and 2022 but in October 2024 the Chinese and Indian governments reached an agreement to deconflict border patrolling.¹¹² As of now it is unclear whether the India-Pakistan conflict of May 2025, and the PRC's increased support to Pakistan in its aftermath, will lead to renewed hostilities between the PRC and India.

Conclusion

Although most of the proxy wars explored in this article did not escalate into direct conflict, it does not change the fact that proxy wars are becoming more common and destabilizing. Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates have externalized their rivalry by backing opposing sides in the ongoing Sudanese civil war, which is also drawing in Egypt.¹¹³



Eritrean-Ethiopian relations have deteriorated because they support different factions in Tigray's internal politics.¹¹⁴ Besides its war on Ukraine, Russia sponsors separatists in Moldova and Georgia, and could rally ethnic Russians in the Baltics and Central Asia.¹¹⁵ The India-Pakistan conflict in May 2025 was initiated by the former to avenge a 22 April terrorist attack by Lashkar-e-Taiba, a suspected Pakistani proxy, although the Pakistani government denies any involvement.¹¹⁶ After signing a ceasefire agreement, Pakistan officials have accused India of being involved in a spate of attacks by the Baloch Liberation Army.¹¹⁷

The increasingly complex and fraught proxy wars of today are templates for how future conflicts will unfold as the global order continues to fragment and states feel less constrained in advancing their interests. The line between proxy war and direct conflict will continue to blur. More disconcerting, the Cold War-era assumption that nuclear powers will avoid direct conflict can no longer be taken for granted. While Russia and the United States have studiously avoided direct conflict in their proxy wars, India, Pakistan, and the PRC have shown no such hesitation. Perhaps this *modus operandi* is the logical next step in a world where interstate conflict for the sake of territorial expansion is resurgent.¹¹⁸

The U.S. Army will be called upon to deter these escalations and prevail in conflict wherever and

Fishing boats of the People's Republic of China (PRC) band together with ropes to preclude boarding of any individual boat after being chased by Korean Coast Guard rubber boats in an effort to stop alleged illegal fishing in South Korean waters in November 2020. The PRC's massive fishing fleet, numbering in the tens of thousands, is sent all over the world to do commercial fishing while also collecting intelligence. The fleet has defied and intimidated countries as far away as Ecuador and had operated in the coastal waters off Africa and near Asian regional powers like Vietnam, the Philippines, and India. (Screenshot from Yonhap News Agency)

whenever U.S. interests are at stake. However, due to a resource-constrained environment, it will be expected to do so with leaner and fewer forces.¹¹⁹ To successfully counter adversaries' blurring of proxy war with conventional war, the U.S. Army must create synergy between its own proxy war and conventional capabilities. This can be achieved through improved information-sharing between ARSOF units and theater armies to ensure advance warning of potential escalations, while the rapid augmentation of forward-stationed forces with high-end capabilities buys additional time and space for the joint force to enter the fray. ■

The views expressed here are the author's own and do not reflect the views of his past or present organizations.

Notes

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